LEADING AND MANAGING SCHOOLS

Edited by Helen O'Sullivan and John [illegible]am

# Leading and Managing Schools

Edited by
Helen O'Sullivan and
John West-Burnham

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First published 2011

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SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
33 Pekin Street #02-01
Far East Square
Singapore 048763

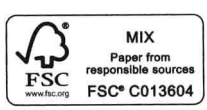
**Library of Congress Control Number: 2010937240**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-85702-395-7
ISBN 978-0-85702-396-4 (pbk)

Typeset by C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire
Printed on paper from sustainable resources



# Leading and Managing Schools

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# Introduction

This book is an analysis and review of the current state of school leadership in Ireland. However, we firmly believe that the issues raised are international in their significance. Each chapter represents a personal perspective and there is no attempt at any sort of collective view. Each chapter focuses on a specific theme and explores it from the author's perspectives of the current issues in education and the implications for the future, particularly with regard to leadership.

The central premise of the book is that both leadership and management in education are important and have the potential to make a significant difference to the effectiveness of schools and the quality of learning and teaching. Moreover, that they have the potential to realise the entitlement of every child and young person to an optimum educational experience so that they realise their potential, however expressed.

To understand the context within which that school leadership must be exercised it is important to consider recent events. Very few countries have undergone the radical social and economic change, within such a short period of time, that Ireland has in the past 25 years. Ireland was a highly homogeneous society with a very clear hegemony around core values. As in many other European countries that is now replaced by heterogeneity and a world modelled on subjectivist approaches.

A number of factors have affected, and been affected by, that change story.

## Economic factors

Over time Ireland changed from being an agricultural society with close-knit rural communities to a knowledge society of large urban developments. The dominance of rural life and economic activity

was replaced by an urban technological culture. From 1995 to 2008 Ireland's economic success captured the world's imagination and became known as the Celtic Tiger. Ireland became, and can still claim to be, a knowledge-based economy. It became the largest exporter of software in the world and the second largest exporter of pharmaceuticals in Europe after Switzerland. It also became a hub for companies in Life Sciences, Information and Communication Technologies and the digital media space, chosen as a European hub by Intel, Facebook, Yahoo, Merck, Siemens, Microsoft, Pfizer, Apple, Google and Amazon.com to name just a few. Irish self-image underwent major revision with the economic flourishing leading to a sense of confidence and self-efficacy never felt before.

Then came the global financial collapse with devastating consequences in Ireland.

## Cultural/societal factors

Historically Ireland might be characterised as a society based on high trust and an explicit social compact. Over recent decades a number of controversies have together led to the breaking of that trust. Like its global counterparts Ireland has suffered the fallout from the economic collapse, and the revelations that attended it, political scandals that rocked the belief in public service for the public good, professionals found guilty of malpractice and finally the discrediting of the church. The fall of the church in Ireland could be described as catastrophic given that for so long it acted not only as the country's moral barometer, but also the guardian of the country's key services of health and education.

The dynamic Irish economy attracted newcomers to the country. Irish society transformed from one that saw emigration as normative to one that enjoyed unprecedented incoming migration. The 2006 census showed that nearly 10 per cent of the population of Ireland were immigrants. While the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) now estimates net outward migration of 70,000 people in 2010, Ireland has been transformed from a monocultural society to a multicultural society within a generation.

The speed of the economic crash and the fall from grace of figures of authority have had the, perhaps, inevitable outcome of a blame culture clamouring for transparency and accountability. The 'social partnership' model of negotiated change, long regarded as a hallmark of the new Ireland with a shared sense of purpose and commitment, is being severely tested.

The collective self-esteem and shared sense of efficacy have been badly damaged. The loss of central and dominant moral clarity may be said to have created a sense of anomie. This may in turn be reflected in a crisis of leadership. Leadership depends on trust; the loss of trust can lead to questioning of the nature and purpose of leaders and leadership in a society. This situation clearly has profound implications for any discussion of the nature and purpose of education.

## Education system

During the Irish economic boom, a well-educated, young population was frequently cited by multinationals as one of the factors that influenced their decision to base themselves in Ireland. However, Ireland is facing a very different future and the winds of change are beginning to gather force.

Up to recent times, by one set of criteria the performance of the Irish educational system was deemed a matter for congratulation. The PISA report for 2006 showed that in terms of international comparisons Ireland was 5th in terms of literacy, 14th in science and 16th in mathematics. Thus by one limited and highly specific measure the Irish education system was outperforming those of the UK, Germany and France. Therefore, there was little evidence to suggest that all might not be well. Furthermore in 2009 the OECD confirmed that average educational attainment in Ireland had increased dramatically over two decades. However the results from PISA 2009, published in December 2010, reveal a very different picture. PISA 2009 shows remarkably large declines across literacy (now 17th place in ratings of OECD countries) and mathematics (now 26th place) while science results show Ireland holding a similar position to 2006. When the full cohort of participant countries is taken into account, that means the OECD partner countries, the ratings are more unfavourable still. Analysts caution against reading too much into such a decline. They list a number of factors influencing the outcomes of this international assessment such as changing demographics, increase in the numbers of special needs pupils included in PISA 2009 and the scaling procedures used in PISA itself. However, those reservations notwithstanding, and taking into account the fact that international comparisons are only as useful as the relevance and validity of that which is being compared, and are only as pertinent as the last review, those involved in Irish education have to heed the warnings.

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Now questions are being asked, concerns are being raised. In January 2010, reporter Kim Bielenburg stated in a daily newspaper:

> US multinationals have caused some soul-searching among teachers and educators after their severe criticisms of the Irish education system. The American Chamber of Commerce, an influential body that represents some of our biggest employers, believes the school system places too much emphasis on rote learning.
>
> Like many others in the education system, the US employers want more attention paid to problem-solving skills. The US companies highlighted the weaknesses in our Leaving Cert points system. The chamber wants problem-solving capabilities rewarded in exams to encourage the innovation and in a damning critique of the education system, the US bosses criticise the reluctance to make the necessary change to the curriculum to adapt to changing needs.
>
> It says rote learning facilitates high grades in the science, technology and engineering subjects, but this does not reflect the ability of the students to apply their knowledge effectively later in their career.
>
> The attack by the US multinationals comes as another influential body, the Royal Irish Academy, warns of falling standards at third level in Ireland. (*Irish Independent*, 13 January 2010)

Concerns such as those highlighted have been raised internally within the sector by a number of key educationalists in Ireland. The crises of the past two years have led to a radical rethinking of many aspects of life in Ireland. The education system, like many education systems around the world, is being scrutinised as never before. There is a clear need for active leadership, at all levels in the system, if Ireland is to emerge from the current difficulties, economic and societal, with renewed values, renewed trust and a young population educated for a different future. There is an onus on the professionals in education to lead that scrutiny from within with a determination to bring about the changes that are needed. The sorts of questions that might be addressed include the following.

- What kind of society do the Irish people wish to create from the ashes of the recent turmoil?
- What values should underpin education for that society?
- What does the recent Irish story tell us about the Irish education system of the past? What lessons can be learned?

- What should characterise the professionalism of the teacher for the 21st century?

This is a period of great challenge in which many historical certainties are being replaced by ambiguity and choice where previously there was none. We hope that this book will contribute to a professional examination of those choices. Each chapter in the book addresses an area of specific concern and raises questions and possible strategies in order to inform and extend the debate. The book is in three parts. Part One presents a global stance from a generalised 'big picture' perspective on issues of change and governance; Part Two focuses specifically on the Irish context while Part Three looks at the future of school leadership in Ireland, taking into consideration global trends and the challenges facing Irish education. We hope that this is a contribution to a series of informed conversations which in themselves will help to shape the emergent pattern of education in Ireland and in other countries around the world.

We are very grateful to our contributors and to SAGE Publications for their commitment to this project.

*Helen O'Sullivan and John West-Burnham*

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# Part I

## The Big Picture

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